

Parable of

***THE GREAT SUPPER***

Luke 14:15-24

by

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I shall not repeat the arguments which convince me that this parable, and that recorded at Matt. 22:1-14, spoken as they were upon different occasions, and with (partially) different aims, should be kept wholly distinct the one from the other. I shall throughout assume this as not needing proof, or else as sufficiently proved. The Lord had been invited 'to eat bread'--a Hebrew idiom, to express not merely eating food, but participating in a meal (Gen. 31:54; 43:32)--with one of the chief Pharisees (ver. 1). The meal must have been costly and ceremonious. There probably were present friends and kinsmen and rich neighbours of his host (ver. 12); between whom were silent struggles for precedence (ver. 7).<sup>1</sup> Among these guests, hostile, no doubt, in the main to the young Galilean teacher, whose fame was everywhere spreading, was one who could not forbear expressing his sympathy with some words which fell from the Lord's lips (ver. 15). But there was not the less a certain latent self-satisfaction in this utterance of his. If one reads that utterance aright, above all in connexion with the parable which follows, and which we are expressly told was addressed to him, there were no misgivings on his part as to his own place among those who should 'eat bread in the kingdom of God.' And yet it was quite possible that when the decisive moment arrived, he might miss the blessedness, of which he spoke in such edifying language; well contented with things here, might refuse to be lifted up into that higher world to which he was bidden. To him, quite unconscious of any such danger, and in him to us all, the parable that follows was vouchsafed.

*'A certain man made a great supper, and bade many'--'a supper,'* it has been often explained, because, as such takes place at evening, so in the evening of time, in the 'last hour' (1 John 2:18; 1 Cor. 10:11), Christ came and invited men to the fulness of Gospel blessings. But this is pressing too far a word of fluctuating use; which, even if it does in later Greek signify predominantly a supper, was not upon this account selected here, but as designating the principal meal in the day. Men's relish for things heavenly is so slight, their desire so faint, that God graciously presents these things to them under such alluring images as this, that so they may be stirred up to a more earnest longing after

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<sup>1</sup> This snatching at the first places is adduced by Theophrastus (*Char.* 21) as an example of the μικροφιλοτιμία or petty ambition. See also Becker, *Charicles*, vol. i. p. 427.

them.<sup>2</sup> The *'many'* whom the maker of the feast first bade are the Jews;<sup>3</sup> yet not so much the entire nation, as those who might be presumed the most favourably disposed for the embracing of the truth, the priests and elders, the Scribes and Pharisees, as distinguished from the publicans and sinners, and other more despised portions of the nation; whose turn only arrives when these others have made light of the invitation.

*'And sent his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for all things are now ready.'*<sup>4</sup> Some will have it that the guests, in needing thus to be reminded that the feast waited their presence, showed already how lightly they esteemed the invitation. But this is a mistake, such having been, as is noted elsewhere, the usual custom; and their contempt of the honour vouchsafed them, with their breach of promise,--for we must presume that they had engaged themselves to come,--is first displayed in the excuses which they make for their absence. Some interpreters, perhaps the larger number, see in the servant who reminded the guests that the feast was ready,<sup>5</sup> and bade them to enter into the enjoyment of good things, not now far off but near, the Evangelists and Apostles; but this interpretation, which I also adopted once, does not, I must own, now please me so well as the other, which sees in him not any series or company of the servants of the Heavenly King, but one and one only; that One being no less than the great Apostle and High Priest of our profession Himself, who, being in the form of God, yet took upon Him the form of a servant, and as such, according to the prophecies of Him which went before, above all in the later Isaiah, accomplished his Father's will upon earth. In the parable of the Barren Fig-tree the Son assumes exactly the same subordinate position and functions (Luke 13:7, 8) as would, according to this distribution of parts, be ascribed to Him here.

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2 A sermon by Gregory the Great (*Hom. 36 in Evang.*) on this parable begins beautifully thus: 'There is commonly this difference between the delicacies of the body and of the soul, that bodily delicacies, when not being possessed, cause men greatly to desire them, but when possessed and being eaten straightway dispose the eater to contemn them. On the other hand spiritual delicacies, when not possessed, are held in contempt, but when they are possessed are desired, and the more the hungry man partakes of them the more he hungers for them. In the delicacies of the body the longing is pleasant, the experience unpleasant: in those of the soul the longing is naught, but the experience is more pleasing.'

3 *Καλεῖν* (= *vocare*) is the technical word for the inviting to a festival (Matt. 22:3; John 2:2; 1 Cor. [10]:27); that too by which St. Paul expresses that union of an outward word bidding, and an inward Spirit drawing, whereby God seeks to bring men into his kingdom; corresponding to the *ἐλκεῖν* of St. John (6:44; 12:32). Both express well that the power brought to bear on man's will is a moral power, and man a moral being; capable, though called, of not coming,--of resisting the attraction that would draw him, if he will. This attraction of bidding, outward by the word, inward by the Spirit, is the 'holy calling' (2 Tim. 1:9), 'calling of God' (Rom. 11:29), 'heavenly calling' (Heb. 3:1), 'high calling' (Phil. 3:14).

4 Theophylact has here a remarkable comparison: 'For as with a festering and malignant sore which physicians allow to discharge all its foul matter before applying their salves, so also it was needful that sin should display all its innate qualities, and that only then should the great physician impose his remedy.'

5 Augustine, *Apostoli*; Gregory the Great, *Prædicatorum ordo*.

*'And they all with one consent<sup>6</sup> began to make excuse.'*<sup>7</sup> Whether there is any essential difference between the excuse, or 'offcome,' as it would be called in one of our northern dialects, which the first guest urges, and that urged by the second, whether these represent hindrances different in their nature and character, by which different men are kept back from Christ, or whether both would alike teach us the same general lesson, that the love of the world robs men of all desire and relish for heavenly things, it is not easy to determine. I prefer to think that a difference is intended. Perhaps the first, who pleaded, *'I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it,'* represents those who are elate of heart through already acquired possessions. He is going to see his estate, not exactly in the spirit of Ahab when he visited the vineyard made his own by wrong (1 Kin. 21:15, 16); for there lies no guilt in the thing itself which he is doing; and indeed it adds greatly to the solemnity of the warning here conveyed, that no one of the guests is kept away by an occupation in itself sinful; while yet all become sinful, because the first place, instead of a place merely subordinate, is allotted to them. But he is going to see his possession that he may glory in it, as Nebuchadnezzar gloried as he walked in his palace and said, 'Is not this great Babylon, that I have built . . . by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?' (Dan. 4:30). But while he thus represents those whom 'the lust of the eye and the pride of life' detain from Christ; with the second guest it is rather the care of this life, not the pride of having, but the anxiety of getting, which so fills his soul that there is no room for higher thoughts or desires. He has made an important purchase, and cannot put off for a single day the trial of how it is likely to turn out;<sup>8</sup> *'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them.'* He, as he insinuates, is at the very point of starting (πορευομαι), and begs that he may not be detained. The number five may not perplex us; Elijah finds Elisha ploughing with *twelve* yoke of oxen (1 Kin. 19:19). Both of these guests offer fair words, *'I pray thee have me excused,'* even while they evade the invitation. We must in neither case regard the excuse as invented, and resting on no ground of facts, however the more usual way in the world may be to see first, and to buy afterwards. So, as is expressly recorded, does the virtuous woman of the Book of Proverbs: 'She considereth a field, and buyeth it' (31:16). She does not, as the invited guest of the parable, buy it first, and go to see it afterwards.

If in these two it is the pride and the business, in the last it is the pleasure, of the world which keeps him from Christ. 'See you not that I have a feast of my own? why trouble me

6 Παρατιήσεως (Bengel), καρδίας (Grotius), συσθήκης (Euthymius), γνώμης (Valckenaer), φωνής (Olshausen), όρμης αιτίας ψυχής, or some other such word, must be here supplied. The Revised Version retains the 'consent' of the Authorized, but naturally prints it in italics.

7 Παρατιεισθαι is used for 'refuse' and 'make excuse:' for the first, Acts 25:11; for the second at ver. 19, where εχε με παρητημένον is rather a Latin idiom (habeas me excusatum) than a Greek. Επαινεκν την κλησιν is the more classic phrase.

8 So Augustine (*Serm.* cxii. 2): 'In the purchased farm mastership is denoted: pride therefore is reprovod.' His mystical explanation of the things which kept away the second guest is less satisfactory, but this is as true as beautiful: 'The love of earthly things is the clog of the spiritual wings. Behold thou didst lust and thou art caught. Who will give thee wings, as a dove's, when wilt thou fly to where thou mayst truly rest, seeing that here where thou art foully caught, thou didst perversely desire to rest?' Cf. *Enarr. in Ps.* cxxxviii. 10.

then with yours? *I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.*<sup>9</sup> According to the Levitical law, this would have been reason sufficient why he should not go to battle (Deut. 24:5); but it is none why he should not come to the feast<sup>10</sup> (1 Cor. 7:29). He, however, counts it more than sufficient. The other guests, conscious of the insufficiency of the pleas which they urged, gave at least courteous denials, would have the servant carry back fair words to the master of the feast; but this one has a reason perfectly valid why he should not attend, and, except in so far as his *'I will not'* clothes itself in the form of *'I cannot,'* does not trouble himself to send any apology for his absence.<sup>11</sup> One may trace here the same ascending scale of contumacy [obstinate and wilful rebelliousness] in the bearing of the guests, although not so strongly marked, as in the other parable (Matt. 22:5, 6), where some make light of the message, others evil entreat and kill the messengers. The first of these guests would be very glad to come, if only it were possible, if there were not a constraining necessity which unfortunately keeps him away. It is a needs be, so at least he describes it, so he would have it represented to the maker of the feast. The second alleges no such constraining necessity, but is simply going upon sufficient reason on another errand; yet he too prays to be excused. The third has engagements of his own, and declares outright, *'I cannot come.'* It is beautifully remarked by Bengel that there is another buying of a field (Matt. 13:44), another setting of the hand to the plough (Luke 9:62), the participation in another wedding (2 Cor. 11:2), which would not have hindered the accepting of this invitation, since rather they would one and all have been identical with it.

In what remarkable connexion do their excuses stand to the declaration of the Saviour which presently follows: 'If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple;'<sup>12</sup> and how apt a commentary the words of St. Paul supply, 'This I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth, that both they that have wives be as though they had none; and they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and they that buy, as though they possessed not; and they that use this world, as not abusing it' (1 Cor. 7:29-31); since it was not the having,--for they had nothing which it was not lawful for men to have,--but the unduly loving these things, which proved their hindrance, and ultimately excluded them from the feast.

*'So that servant came, and shewed his lord these things;'* declared the ill success which he

9 On the same grounds Cræsus would have excused his son from the great hunting party which had for him so fatal an issue (Herodotus, i. 36): 'For he is newly married and is busied with that.'

10 Gerhard sums up well the three hindrances in three words, 'Position, wealth, pleasure;' and Hildebert in two monkish verses evidently interprets as I have done: *Villa, boves, uxor, cœnam clausere vocatis; Mundus, cura, caro cœlum clausere renatis.* 'A farm, a yoke of oxen, a wife closed the supper to the bidden guests; The world, the cares of business, the flesh close heaven to men who have been born again.'

11 Bengel: 'The maker of this excuse, as he seems to have a better seeming and more honourable reason, so also exceeds the rest in rudeness.' We may quote here Seneca's words (*Ep.* 19): 'The cause lies in the unwillingness, the impossibility is the excuse.'

12 Of all the excuses made by the invited guests, Bengel well says: 'All these might have been cured by that holy hatred,' ver. 26.

has met,--reported to him the excuses which all had made;--even as hitherto in all likelihood not so much as one among the spiritual chiefs of the Jewish nation had attached himself openly and without reserve to Christ (John 7:48). *'Then<sup>13</sup> the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes<sup>14</sup> of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed,<sup>15</sup> and the halt, and the blind.'* The anger of God, and we have this anger expressly declared in two other of the parables (Matt. 28:44; 22:7), is the anger of despised love; yet not for this the less terrible. This second class of invited must still be sought *within the city*; we have not therefore yet arrived at the calling of the Gentiles. There lies a distinct reminiscence here of the precept given just before to him at whose table the Lord was sitting; 'Call thou the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind' (ver. 13). The great Giver of the heavenly feast fulfils his own command. *He bids to his table the spiritually sick, the spiritually needy; while the rich in their own virtues, in their own merits, at once exclude themselves, and are excluded by Him (Luke 6:24, 25; Rev. 3:17). The people who knew not the law, the despised and the outcast, these should enter into the kingdom of God, before the wise, the prudent,--before those who said they saw, who thanked God they were not as other men, who had need of nothing.*

*'And the servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded.'* The suggestion of some later commentators, as of Meyer, to the effect that the servant, knowing what his Master's mind would be, had anticipated this command of his, and had already brought the gracious message to them to whom he is now bidden to bring it, that there is, in fact, no interval of time to be supposed here during which the servant fulfils a new commission which he has received, but only an announcement of its fulfilment, is ingenious, and certainly is not without its attractions, but does not compel assent. He proceeds: *'And yet there is room.'* Hereupon, since grace will as little as nature endure a vacuum,<sup>16</sup> he receives a new and last commission: *'Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.'* If those *'in the streets and lanes of the city'* were the more abject among the Jews, the meaner, the more ignorant, the more deeply sunken in sin; then those without the city,--which *'city'* we must take as symbol of the theocracy--in the country round about, wandering in the highways, and camping as gipsies now-a-days, under the hedges,<sup>17</sup> will be the yet more despised and morally abject Gentiles, the *pagans*, in all senses of that word.<sup>18</sup> It will thus appear that the parable, hitherto historic, becomes prophetic here; for it declares how God had a larger purpose of grace than could be satisfied by the coming in of a part and remnant of the Jewish people,--that He had prepared a feast, at which more should sit down than they,--founded a Church with room in it for Gentile as for Jew,--those too being *'fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God.'* It is not that this is explicitly declared, for the time was not yet

13 Ambrose: 'After the careless insults of the rich.'

14 Πλατεiai and ρύμαι occur together (Isa. 15:2, LXX).

15 Τους αναπήρους. The word, occurring twice in this chapter (ver. 13, 21), is found nowhere else in the N.T., not once in the Septuagint, and only once (2 Macc. 8:24) in the Apocrypha. In Plato (*Crit.* 53 a) the αναπήροι keep company as here with the χωλοί and the τυφλοί.

16 Bengel: 'Nature and grace alike abhor a vacuum.'

17 Bengel: 'Hedges, which serve beggars for walls.'

18 Euthymius: 'The dwellings of the Gentiles, as not fortified by the law and the special guardianship of God as were those of the Jews, and as trampled upon by devils.'

for the unfolding of this mystery; but it is here wrapt up, and, like so much else in Scripture, biding its time.<sup>19</sup>

'*Compel them to come in,*' has always been a favourite text with the persecutor and the inquisitor; with all who, doing violence to the rights of conscience, would fain find in Scripture a warrant or a pretext for this. It must be owned, too, that others to whom one would very unwillingly apply such names have appealed to these words as justifying that forcible separation of men from their errors, that endeavour to save men against their will, from which, where the power is present, it is often so difficult to abstain. Thus Augustine, writing to Count Boniface, and urging that a certain constraint on the part of the civil power might be fitly used for the bringing back of the Donatists to the unity of the Church, appeals to this parable in proof.<sup>20</sup> And in what he thus urges Calvin finds nothing amiss, but the contrary rather.<sup>21</sup> And yet it is strange how there ever could have been drawn from these words arguments for any compulsion but a moral one. For first, dealing with the parable in the letter, to suppose any other compulsion save that of strong persuasion is idle; for how can we imagine this single servant,--he is but one throughout,--driving before him, from the country into the city, a flock of unwilling guests, and these gathered from the rude and lawless class unto whom he is now sent? But, indeed, this '*Compel them to come in*' is spoken with quite a different intention. The giver of the feast does not anticipate on their parts any reluctance to accept his invitation, nor any indifference toward it, which should need to be forcibly overcome. What rather he expects is that these houseless dwellers in the highways and by the hedges will hold themselves so unworthy of the invitation as hardly to be persuaded that it was intended for them; will not be induced without a certain constraint to enter the rich man's dwelling, and share in his magnificent entertainment. And when we pass on to the spiritual thing signified, since faith cannot be forced, what can this compelling mean,<sup>22</sup> save that strong earnest exhortation, which the ambassadors of Christ will address to their fellows, when themselves deeply convinced of the tremendous issues which are for every man linked with the acceptance or rejection of the message which they bear? They will '*compel,*' but only as the angels; who, when Lot lingered, laid hold upon his hand and brought him forth, and set him forcibly beyond the limits of the doomed city (Gen. 19:16); or the ambassadors of Christ will, in another way, '*compel,*' for they will speak as delivering his message who has a right to be heard by his creatures,--who not merely entreats, but commands, all men everywhere to repent and believe the Gospel.<sup>23</sup> Anselm observes, that God compels

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19 Godet has said happily here: 'As verse 21 is the text of the first part of the Acts (i.-xii. conversion of the Jews), so are verses 22 and 23 of the second (xiii.-end, conversion of the Gentiles), and even of the present economy.'

20 *Ep.* 185; compare *Ep.* 50; *Serm.* cxii. 7; *De Unit. Eccles.* 20; and Bernard, *De Grat. et Lib. Arbit.* 11.

21 'Although faith is voluntary, yet we see that by such methods the obstinacy of those who only obey when compelled may usefully be subdued.'

22 Even Maldonatus explains it thus. Sinners, he says, are to be so entreated, 'that after a manner they may seem to be compelled;' and Bengel: 'This does not apply to every kind of compulsion. . . . Paul in his fury for Judaism compels in one fashion, Paul the servant of Jesus Christ in another.'

23 Euthymius brings out well this thought which lies hid in that '*Compel*': 'Because in these cases the gospel must be more curtly and insistently proclaimed, as with men mightily possessed by devils and sleeping amid the deep darkness of deceit.'

men to come in, when He drives them by strong calamities to seek and find refuge with Him and in his Church;<sup>24</sup> or, as Luther has it, they are compelled to come in, when the law is broadly preached, terrifying their consciences,<sup>25</sup> and driving them to Christ, as their only refuge and hope.

The parable closes with an indignant menace: *'For I say unto you, That none of those men<sup>26</sup> which were bidden shall taste of my supper.'* But whose menace is it? Is it that of the giver of the feast? or is it that of Christ, standing outside of the parable, and speaking in his own person and name? Either answer has its own embarrassments. Take these as words of the householder in the parable, and how account for the plural *'you,'* addressed to the single servant?--the suggestion that these words are spoken to the guests that have accepted the invitation, and that here is the explanation of this *'you,'* being very unnatural. I take the words as rather the Lord's own, and spoken in his own person. For the moment He throws off, or half throws off, the disguises under which He habitually walks among the children of men. Turning to his hearers who had been watching for his harm, He assumes for an instant that central place in the kingdom of God, bringing home a *'tua res agitur'* to each and all of them who had been listening to Him, so perfectly content with themselves. It is He, as here He lets them know, who receives and excludes. He has a right to speak of the supper as *'his supper,'* and He does so speak, passing for one indignant moment from the kingdom of shadows to that of substances, while He pronounces the doom of his enemies. Exclusion, total and final, from his supper, to which, when they saw others entering, the despisers might desire to be admitted, this shall be the penalty of their contempt. There is such a bitter cry, the repentance as of Esau, when it is plainly seen that the birthright has been transferred to another; but it does not bring back the blessing (Heb. 12:17). That is forfeited for ever; and no after earnestness avails anything to reverse the doom (Prov. 1:28; Matt. 25:11, 12; John 8:21).

Comparing this parable and that of the Marriage of the King's Son, we may note with how fine a skill all the minor circumstances are arranged to be in consistent keeping in each. There the principal person, being a king, has armies at his command, whole bands of servants to execute his behests. The refusal to accept *his* invitation was there, according to Eastern notions of submission, nothing less than rebellion; and, being accompanied with outrages done to his servants, called out that terrible retribution. Here, as the offence is in every way lighter, so also is the penalty; that is, in the outward circumstances which

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24 So Gregory the Great (*Hom.* 36): 'Those therefore who, when broken down by worldly adversity, return unto the love of God, are compelled to come in.'

25 So Buonaventura: 'With the threat, that is, of eternal punishments and a manifestation of present ones.'

26 Bengel bids us to note what we might easily miss, namely our Lord's use of *ανδρων*, and not *ανθρωπων*, here. Though as much is not expressly stated, yet the whole course of the parable implies that they were the *homines ampli*, the men of rank and wealth in the city, to whom the first invitation came; they and they only being therein charged with the guilt or threatened with the penalties of refusal. All this is implied in the use of *ανδρες* here, which would not have fitted either the second detachment of guests or the third: the refusers are the 'wise,' the 'mighty,' the 'noble' of 1 Cor. 1:26; to whom the heavenly calling so often comes in vain. Bengel also well remarks on *those men*, 'The pronoun has a separative force.'

supply the framework of the parable, being no more than exclusion from a festival; though indeed not lighter, when taken in its spiritual signification; for it is nothing less than exclusion from the kingdom of God, 'everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and the glory of his power.'